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Messick Point Economic Development:

A Survey of Area Seafood Businesses and Potential for Industry Growth

Prepared for

The City of Poquoson

by

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Industry Status

There are currently five seafood processing, wholesaling and retailing businesses including a shellfish hatchery located on Messick Point. These businesses specialize primarily in near shore species including; crab, oysters, clams, and finfish. Sea scallops and shrimp complement the product lines of some businesses. Another business practice which occurs is the relaying of clams and oysters. Most Messick Point businesses and the public boat landing are located along Front Cove. Water side access to business docks and the public ramp is restricted by water depths at low tide.

In addition to fish and shellfish landed at Messick Point, commercial fisheries harvests from Seaford, Gloucester, Hampton and the Poquoson River are brought overland for sale to area businesses. This is not always convenient and can be expensive depending upon proximity and access to other docks and the wharfage (a charge to land product at a dock). Although price is frequently identified as the most important factor in determining where commercial fishermen land their harvest, these other variables affect fishermen's net income.

The public boat ramp serves the access needs of both commercial watermen and recreational users. There are roughly 30 mooring stakes adjacent to the public boat ramp, with about 11 small boats moored in the vicinity. At the end of Messick Road there is small boat harbor that permits docking of about 14 small to mid-size fishing vessels, including boats equipped for crab dredging, crab potting, patent tonging and shellfish relaying. Back Cove has three private piers and roughly 11 mooring stakes. Visual inspection indicates about 8 boats moor in this basin. These moorings are essentially free of charge with only the cost of obtaining and driving the stake.

Industry Needs

The industry at Messick Point, like much of the seafood industry, consists of small businesses. Like many small businesses, plans for expansion or upgrading of facilities are constrained by capital requirements. Supply of fish and shellfish is as another constraint to business and industry expansion at Messick Point. Restoring the channel potentially increases the amount of fish and shellfish landed at Messick Point businesses. The exception is Intertidal Marine Inc., a shellfish hatchery and mariculture venture. While improved access via a channel should increase the relative proportion of the Chesapeake Bay Fishery harvest landed at Messick Point, businessmen expressed concern about the sustainability of Bay fisheries in general. The scarcity of crabs last year and the general decline in oyster populations are problems identified by businessmen.

Water quality in the Messick Point area is of particular interest to the Petres, owners of Intertidal Marine. Mr. Petre believes that if managed properly, dredging of a channel could be achieved with minimal negative impacts to the shellfish hatchery. He expressed concern over the effects further development will have on water quality at the hatchery intake and throughout the estuary. Other businesses in the area use surface water for shedding crabs. Although the oyster beds in the area have not supported commercial harvest for the past several years, fishing still occurs on clam beds in the vicinity. The adjacent estuaries are also used for wet storage/relaying of clams and oysters. The viability of these activities is directly linked to water quality.

Most of these businesses have retail outlets in addition to their wholesale operations. Renovation of the boat launch facilities reportedly has increased traffic into the area and supported retail sales. Businessmen report that the popularity of the boat landing is due to its central location. "Within 30-40 minutes an average size outboard can be at the Bay Bridge Tunnel or New Point Light House." Periodically heavy use of the launch site has resulted in cars being blocked and the parking of vehicles and trailers on private property. While this overcrowding appears to be only a mild nuisance at present, expansion of parking facilities are likely to be a necessary component of any further development in the area. Other facilities/activities aimed at increasing recreational use of the area mentioned were: A small hotel (fish camp), fishing guide service (by watermen); and marina facilities including dry storage.

The need for marina facilities for commercial vessels was also mentioned as a constraint to commercial development in the area. If there are more vessels in the area it follows that there will also be a need for boat slips and places for them to land their catches. It was reported that the availability of docking facilities for inshore fishing vessels is decreasing in the Hampton Roads area. Most commercial docks in the area are affiliated with a specific processor where the fishermen sell their product. Recreational marinas accommodate commercial vessels only when recreational use is low and generally require wharfage in addition to slip rental. A cooperative arrangement between fishermen and processors to develop docking facilities might be advantageous for both groups. It is unknown whether this has ever been successfully accomplished. The potential benefits of any marina facility would need to be weighed against potential impacts on existing businesses, local fisheries, wetlands and the boat-owners' who currently moor their boats with stakes. The potential for out-of-state buyers to come in and buy directly from the fishermen and to bypass local businesses was also of concern.

A marine railway/dry dock facility is located on the Tennis property on Back Cove. The extent to which this facility is operational or could be integrated into any development plans is not known.

Recruiting Seafood Businesses

Two depths have been proposed restoring the channel -- a 6 foot Mean Low Water (MLW) channel that would allow for access of most bay boats -- and a 12 foot MLW

channel that would allow for most sea-going trawlers. Seafood processors believe that restoring the channel would increase their operating efficiency and volume. There were anecdotal references to fishermen who live in the area, dock there boat elsewhere, then transport their catch by truck to Messick Point for sale.

At least one Messick Point businessman is interested in having scallop boats off load and process in the area. There are always rumors of businesses wanting to move. At present, there seems to be adequate (if not ideal) docking facilities for the trawlers. Having boats move from one dock to another in Virginia may not further the interests of the Commonwealth. Development aimed at recruiting this segment of the industry (dredging deep channels and other construction) could make the project ineligible for funding from the Virginia Port Authority. Another issue is the Fisheries Management Plans (FMPs) currently under review, in particular Amendment 4 of the sea scallop FMP. Amendment 4 as it is currently proposed includes a moratorium on vessels entering the fishery. At present the moratorium dates for vessels entering the fishery are 2 March 1989 for existing boats and 2 March 1990 for boats being refitted or under construction. This moratorium is designed to limit the size of the sea scallop fishing fleet. While it is possible that some boats will leave Virginia. It is more likely that boats affected by the moratorium will direct their efforts toward other species. Essentially there will be no new entrants to the fishery to support development of additional port facilities. Public hearings on the sea scallop FMP have not started.. It is advisable to monitor this and other FMPs as they progress through the public review and implementation process.

The seafood industry also faces increased regulatory pressure from FDA, EPA, Virginia Department of Health and Virginia Water Control Board. Whether a new facility or one that was "grandfathered" owners have invested considerable amounts of capital and time in order to operate under current regulations. While some businesses may not be completely satisfied with their present location, the costs of constructing or modifying facilities, undertaking the permitting process, and moving currently limit the feasibility of relocating for many businesses. Whether the issue is seafood inspection, environmental quality, or occupational health and safety, regulations will continue to play an important role in the seafood industry. These "problems" also represent "opportunities" for those with the resources to find viable solutions.